

Energy fixes not as easy as they sound

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It's easy to say we should not build coal-fired power plants.

It's easy to point out that they spew mercury into the air. It's easy to say we should use renewable energy sources and conserve electricity.

In reality, it's not that easy.

Consider compact fluorescent light bulbs, or CFLs. They cost between three and four times as much as incandescent bulbs. For many people who live paycheck to paycheck, that's a greater consideration than any long-term savings. And, while the energy savings from CFLs are significant, they don't offer a permanent conservation solution.

The South Carolina Electric Cooperatives want to distribute 7 million CFLs over the next 10 years to their customers. This is part of a laudable conservation and research effort funded by a 1.1 percent rate increase. If those 7 million bulbs all were put into use, they would save the equivalent of the energy used by 35,000 homes. Problem is, the cooperatives say, this state adds 35,000 homes about every two years.

CFLs buy us a little time.

Next, consider a switch to more efficient appliances. Those appliances are more expensive. The cooperatives say a washing machine with an Energy Star rating of 83 costs about \$1,500. That's a big burden for people in a state with the nation's ninth-lowest median income.

The ability to get financially strapped people to conserve is such an obstacle that the cooperatives have concluded it would take a 50 percent subsidy to achieve what they have termed "technically possible, achievable and cost-effective" energy savings among the 1.5 million residents they serve in this state. Where would it come from? Will a state that abhors taxes subsidize energy conservation to the tune of 50 percent? Should it? Should the utilities?

These are difficult questions.

Often, alternative energy sources are touted as the solution to shortages and pollution.

Rather than burn coal to produce power, we should get our electricity with wind, solar or bio-mass generators. The cooperatives would love to use these technologies, but none of them is really practical yet. In fact, South Carolina's in a particularly poor position for alternative energy. According to the cooperatives, this state has the capacity to produce only between 3 percent and 5 percent of its 2017 power needs with existing alternative-fuel technologies. Given the lead-time on new power plants, between five and 15 years, utilities can't wait and hope for new technology.

So coal probably will be part of this state's energy solutions for the near and mid term.

Power companies love energy conservation. There might be no greater supporter of compact fluorescents than the electric cooperative executives who came through Greenville last week to

discuss their efforts. They love renewable fuels, too. But they're frank about the fact that renewable technologies are not yet financially feasible.

Yes, solutions such as energy efficient light bulbs and appliances need to be pursued. Subsidies to help people of less means buy those efficient devices should be discussed. Alternative fuels should be researched so our energy can one day be produced cleanly and more efficiently. The state's electric cooperatives are doing a good job addressing these issues.

But for now, South Carolina and the nation will have power needs met with existing technologies. And everyone needs to understand the solutions aren't as easy as they sound.